

U.S. PATENT APPLICATION

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Invention: METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR OBTAINING ORDERS FROM
CUSTOMERS ON AN E-COMMERCE WEBSITE

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SPECIFICATION

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METHOD AND SYSTEM FOR OBTAINING ORDERS FROM CUSTOMERS ON AN E-COMMERCE WEBSITE

FIELD OF THE INVENTION

5 The present invention relates to electronic commerce, and, in particular, to a method and system for obtaining orders from customers on an e-commerce website.

BACKGROUND OF THE INVENTION

10 The Internet is a global communications system in which a vast number of computers and other devices are networked to allow user-to-user communications and transfers of data files from one machine to any other on the network. The World Wide Web serves as one type of interface to the Internet that allows users to readily navigate the Internet's vast resources. The Web allows information and data dispersed across the Internet to be linked in an easily accessible way.

15 The World Wide Web uses a client/server architecture in which client programs, called web browsers, running on users' computers request data from server programs running on other computers, called servers, located elsewhere on the Internet. The data requested by a user's browser is typically part of a website maintained by a company
20 or other entity. When the browser program requests the data, a web server hosting the website sends the requested data back over the

Internet to the browser, which then interprets and displays the data on the user's computer screen. Thus, a web browser is a computer program or application that has the ability to request data from any server on the Internet and interpret and display on a user's computer

5 the data sent by a server through the Internet. Conversely, a web server is a computer programmed to respond to web browser requests for data that sends the requested data to the web browser through the Internet.

A web page is typically a file that contains HTML (hypertext mark-up language) files containing text and graphics, along with a set of HTML tags that describe how the text and graphics should be formatted and displayed on a user's computer screen. The tags are instructions that tell the web browser how the page should look when it displays the page on a user's computer. So, for example, the tags

15 serve to change the font size or color, arrange things in columns, etc. The graphics or images on web pages are often GIF files or JPG files. The GIF files are generally used for drawn graphics, while the JPG files are generally used for photographs or scanned images.

The World Wide Web uses an addressing system known as a

20 Uniform Resource Locator (URL). A URL consists of four parts that, when combined, completely define the location of any file or service located anywhere on the Internet. These parts are the protocol, domain name, path, and filename. Thus, a user's browser, in

requesting a web page from a website, sends a message over the Internet that includes at least a transfer protocol (*e.g.*, http://), and a domain name (*e.g.*, www.companyname.com). The last two components of a URL may or may not exist, depending on the location and type of information any given hyperlink points to. The server receives the user's request and retrieves the requested web page or other file, which is composed in HTML. The server then transmits the requested page or other file back across the Internet to the user's computer. The user's browser program receives the HTML file and displays its interpretation of the requested file. Thus, browser programs send requests and receive the data needed to display the HTML page on a user's screen. This includes the HTML file itself, plus each of the graphic, sound and video files mentioned in the HTML file. Once the data is retrieved, the browser formats the data as indicated by the HTML tags and displays it on the user's computer screen.

Web pages are typically hypertext documents, *i.e.*, documents which provide clearly visible links to other documents or web pages on the World Wide Web. When a user clicks on a hypertext link, or hyperlink, a new request to retrieve another file is sent over the Internet. With a web browser, a user typically sees formatted documents that contain text, graphics and highlighted hyperlinks. The browsers let a user navigate the Internet, not by entering commands, but rather by moving a mouse pointer to a desired

hyperlink and clicking. The browser establishes contact with the related server in a remote computer, and the server transfers the requested file to the user's machine, displaying it in the user's browser as another formatted, hyperlink document. Thus, a user can

5 "surf" the web by hopping from hyperlink to hyperlink without delving deeply into the contents of any particular document.

Because the Internet contains vast amounts of information that is accessible by persons browsing the Internet using their personal computers, many people use the Internet to search for specific

10 information. Others, however, simply surf the Internet on a "hit or miss" basis looking for websites and information of interest. Often such persons will stumble upon a website which interests them enough to "bookmark" the site for easy future access. Because of the large numbers of websites and the vast amount of information

15 available on the Internet, it can be difficult to "attract" persons to a particular Internet website.

The Internet has also become a vehicle for electronic commerce through which companies sell products and services to the public via websites. Typically, potential customers will visit a

20 company's website and browse a product catalog or other information presented on the website. In such a situation, it is particularly desirable to attract as many potential customers to a website as possible to increase the likelihood of selling products or services

offered through the website. While a company can list its website with search services available on the Internet, this alone may not be sufficient enough to attract potential customers to the website.

One company seeking to attract potential customers to its website mailed the customers fortune cookies containing a "fortune" that identified the company's website and a promotional offer from the company. When the customer logged onto the company's website, he or she was transferred to a URL site that described the company's promotional offer. The same URL site was used for every customer who received a fortune cookie mailer and who logged onto the company's website, irrespective of the customer's name.

SUMMARY OF THE INVENTION

The present invention is a method and system for inducing potential customers to log into an Internet website and place an order. According to the present invention, mailing lists of potential customers known to have a particular interest are obtained. The mailing lists are obtained through a purchase or lease arrangement from companies in the business of compiling mailing lists. The lists are then screened to eliminate duplicate names and other undesirable names. The screening results in a revised mailing list of names and addresses that are loaded into a website server. Each of the names and addresses are also printed on a postcard with an offer that is

calculated to induce the addressee to visit the website and a URL where the offer can be viewed. The post cards are then mailed to the addressees. A program on the website server seeks to match the names of persons logging into the website with the mailing list names stored in the server. If a login name is matched with a stored name, a special personalized promotional offer page is to presented on the website to the customer. The personalized promotional offer identified on the mailer is intended to reflect the particular interests of the customer logging onto the page so as to induce the customer to visit the website.

BRIEF DESCRIPTION OF THE DRAWINGS

FIGURE 1 is a flow diagram of the order obtaining method of the present invention;

FIGURE 2 is a block diagram of a system for carrying out the order obtaining method of the present invention;

FIGURE 3A is a front view of a postcard used with the present invention; and

FIGURE 3B is a back view of the postcard used with the present invention.

FIGURE 4 is a sample of a webpage including a personalized promotional offer.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PREFERRED EMBODIMENT

The present invention is a method and system for inducing recipients of a mailing to login into a website and place an order at that website. FIGURE 1 is a flow diagram of the order obtaining method 10 of the present invention. The first step 12 in the method 10 is to select one or more mailing lists of potential customers with a particular interest. The mailing lists are chosen to provide relatively high response levels, and, thus, their selection is based on certain criteria, such as the income level or purchasing history of the potential customers. Once a mailing list for a certain type of customer has been selected, the next step 14 is to obtain one or more mailing lists for this type of customer. Considering a single mailing for purposes of describing the invention, the mailing list is obtained through a purchase or lease arrangement. As one skilled in the art will appreciate, there are numerous companies that compile mailing lists of potential customers from various sources, and which offer these lists for purchase or leasing by a company wishing to do a mailing to the persons on the list. The same companies will often have additional information about the persons appearing on the mailing list, such as their age, income, interests and geographic

locations. Once a mailing list is obtained, the next step 16 is to screen the mailing list to eliminate duplicate and other undesirable names. Preferably, this is done by passing the mailing list through a commercially available merge-purge process which eliminates
5 duplicate names on the list and provides various list hygiene functions precedent to mailing. At step 18 shown in FIGURE 1, the commercial merge-purge process is modified to provide a first name and a last name of each addressee, in addition to the mailing name and address.

10 Referring now to FIGURE 2, shown in that figure is a block diagram illustrating a system for carrying out the method of the present invention. This system includes a computer server 32 connected to the Internet 34. Server 32's function it is to host one or more websites that are accessible from the Internet 34. Stored within
15 server 32 is a file 36 that contains the first names and the last names that were obtained from the mailing list through the merge-purge process and that were stored in step 20 of the flow chart of FIGURE 1 in the memory (not shown) of server 32.

Also shown in FIGURE 2 are a series of client systems 38, 40
20 and 42, which can be televisions with Internet access, but which are preferably personal computers with a modem or other means (not shown) for connecting to the Internet 34. Stored in the memory of computers 38, 40 and 42 are browser programs for requesting

information from web servers, such as server 32. The client systems 38, 40 and 42 are typically greater in number than the three systems shown in FIGURE 2. They are typically operated by potential customers desiring to browse various websites accessible through the Internet.

Although not specifically shown in Figure 2, server 32 and computers 38, 40 and 42 would each typically include a central processing unit (CPU) and a system bus that would couple various computer components to the CPU. This system bus may be any of several types of bus structures, including a memory bus or memory controller, a peripheral bus, and a local bus using any of a variety of bus architectures. The memory used by these computers would also typically include random access memory (RAM) and one or more hard disk drives that read from, and write to, (typically fixed) magnetic hard disks. A basic input/output system (BIOS), containing the basic routines that help to transfer information between components of a personal computer system, such as during start-up, may also be stored in read only memory (ROM). Server 32 and computers 38-42 might also include other types of drives for accessing other computer-readable media, such as a removable "floppy" disks, or an optical disk, such as a CD ROM. The hard disk, floppy disk, and optical disk drives are typically connected to a system bus by a hard disk drive interface, a floppy disk drive interface, and an optical drive interface, respectively. The drives and

their associated computer-readable media provide nonvolatile storage of computer-readable instructions, data structures, program modules, and other data used by machines, such as these computers. These computers will also include a modem or other communication device

5 for connecting to the Internet 34. Server 32 and computers 38-42 may also include other typical peripheral devices, such as printers, displays and keyboards. Typically, computer 38-42 would include a display monitor on which various websites are displayed.

To send the mailing list obtained from the merge-purge process

10 to potential customers, a suitable mailer is chosen that will get the attention of the recipients of the mailing. This mailer can be fliers or letters stuffed in an envelope addressed to the various recipients on the mailing list. Preferably, however, the mailer is a postcard 50

15 shown in FIGURES 3A and 3B, which has the advantages of being inexpensive to purchase and less expensive to mail than an envelope with a letter enclosed. Preferably, the postcard paper stock is chosen at step 22 of FIGURE 1 for high visibility and contrast with the printed letters used in the mailing, which are typically black. Thus, for example, the postcard paper stock may be chosen to be a bright

20 orange color which would have a sharp contrast with the black lettering used for the mailing names and addresses. As described at step 24 of the flow diagram of FIGURE 1, and as shown in FIGURE 3A, the printing process consists of printing the mailing name 52 and address 54 of a given recipient on the front 56 of the postcard 50,

while also printing on the back 58 of postcard 50 the target website's uniform resource locator (URL) 60 concatenated with the corresponding first and last name 62 appearing on the front of the postcard. Thus, by way of example, as shown in FIGURE 3B the back of the postcard would have a printing as such:

www.companyname.com/john/doe

or

www.companyname.com/johndoe

10 In the preferred embodiment of the invention, it is desirable to have the primary domain name represent an area of interest of the recipients of the mailing, such as by way of example, "woodworker". This area of interest can be any area of interest, and typically the area of interest will influence the initial mailing list selection process.

15 Once the postcards or other type of mailers have been printed, at step 26 of FIGURE 1 they are mailed or otherwise sent to the potential customers listed on the mailing list. Once the recipients receive the postcards, it is anticipated that the postcards will induce the recipients to log on to the identified server at step 28. For this purpose, the postcard may include information 64, such as a special promotional offer, that will be available to the recipient upon logging

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on to the website (not shown) corresponding to the URL 60 printed on the postcard 50.

The software program used with the server 32 is designed to allow matching of the login names of the postcard recipients with the mailing names maintained in file 36 stored in server 32. This software includes, as noted at step 30 of FIGURE 1, sound-alike software purchasable off the shelf, that allows matching of login names with stored names where there are instances of mis-keyed or misspelled name entries. If, at step 32, the customer login name is matched with a customer name stored in file 36 in server 32, at step 34 a special promotional offer page 70, as shown by way of example in Figure 4, is presented on the server to the customer logging into the website. Preferably the promotional offer 72 or 74 is of such a nature that it induces the customer at step 36 to place an order with the company maintaining the website. Conversely, if a login customer's name does not match one of the names in file 36 stored in server 32, then at step 38 the standard welcome page (not shown) is presented to the customer logging into the website. The special offer page 70 presented at step 34 to a customer whose name matches one of the names stored in file server 36 in server 32 preferably will show the recipient's name, and may be unique only to that customer or a subgroup of customers included in the file 36 stored in server 32. The page 70 including the special offer 72 or 74 may also include one

or more links 78 to the regular catalog or other merchandise or services offered at the standard welcome page.

Although the present invention has been described in terms of a particular embodiment, it is not intended that the invention be
5 limited to that embodiment. Modifications of the disclosed embodiment within the spirit of the invention will be apparent to those skilled in the art. The scope of the present invention is defined by the claims that follow.

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